Collective Civic Engagement and Civic Counter Publics: Theoretical reflections upon a new phenomenon

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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

Diese Arbeit wurde durch das Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) gefördert (Förderkennzeichen: 16DII121, 16DII122, 16DII123, 16DII124, 16DII125, 16DII126, 16DII127,16DII128 – "Deutsches Internet-Institut"). / This work has been funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany (BMBF) (grant no.: 16DII121, 16DII122, 16DII123, 16DII124, 16DII125, 16DII126, 16DII127,16DII128 – "Deutsches Internet-Institut").

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Friess, D. (2021). Collective Civic Engagement and Civic Counter Publics: Theoretical reflections upon a new phenomenon. In *Proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2021* (pp. 1-7). Berlin: Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society - The German Internet Institute. https://doi.org/10.34669/wi.cp/3.7

Proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2020

Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

Collective Civic Engagement and Civic Counter Publics

Theoretical reflections upon a new phenomenon

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KEYWORDS

Public Sphere; Counter Publics; Civic Engagement; Online Activism; Normative Theory

DOI: 10.34669/wi.cp/3.7

The proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2021 "Democracy in Flux: Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres" have been funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany (BMBF) (grant no.: 16DII121, 16DII122, 16DII123, 16DII124, 16DII125, 16DII126, 16DII127, 16DII128 – "Deutsches Internet-Institut").

1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet has been described as public battle ground were hegemonic perspectives frequently clash (Dahlberg, 2007). Against this agonistic understanding of cyber space, studies have investigated counter publics which try to promote their own narratives and political agendas online (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). While previous research has more and more focused on "disruptive forces" (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018) such as conspiracy theorists or extremist groups, this paper adopts another perspective by focusing on *civic forces* which promote democratic norms in public discourses. The public promotion of democratic norms online has recently been introduced as *Online Civic Intervention* (OCI) – a form of user participation that aims to restore deliberative debate (Porten-Cheé et al., 2020). OCI so far, has adopted a micro-level perspective neglecting theoretical considerations for the meso- and macro-level. This paper wants to fill this gap by introducing the concepts of *Collective Civic Engagement* (CCE; meso-level) and *Civic Counter Publics* (CCP; macro-level).

Both concepts originate from the observation that people speak up against the violation of democratic principles in online discussions which can be derived from deliberative theory (Friess & Eilders, 2015). While these civic interventions are naturally performed by individuals, we have also seen the emergence of online activist groups such as the *Iam-here-Network* (Iam-here-network, 2020), *Reconquista Internet* (Garland et al., 2020), or the *International Network against Cyber-Hate* (INACH, 2020). These groups envision to improve online discussions by promoting deliberative norms such as rationality, empathy, and civility. Group members are regular citizens who engage with some sense of common good orientation. Therefore, we characterize these activities as a form of *civic engagement* (Adler & Goggin, 2005). In addition to that, these activity patterns resemble those investigated under the term of online collective action (Harlow & Harp, 2010). Thus, we investigate such behavior under the term C*ollective Civic Engagement* (Friess, Ziegele & Hainbach, 2020).

While collective civic engagement can be researched on the meso-level in terms of internal organization, social constitution, and group identity, it can also be considered a macro phenomenon shifting the focus towards public spheres. This macro perspective becomes accurate when we consider the outcomes of such group activities which is the overall quality of public online debates. In the following we want to make some brief remarks on online publics before discussing the concepts of CCE and CCP in more detail. We conclude with some normative reflections.

2 ONLINE PUBLICS - THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Originating in political philosophy, public sphere conceptions have influenced a broad range of different disciplines including communication scholarship. Particularly, the rapid distribution of the internet has stimulated manifold theoretical reflections on *online* public spheres (e.g., Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Frieß, 2020; Papacharissi, 2002). Against the backdrop of its popularity and the plurality of conceptions, the concept of the public sphere can be described as an "essentiality contested concept" (Rauchfleisch, 2017). Therefore, it is important to gain some degree of clarification. However, since an in-depth discussion of different public sphere conceptions is beyond the scope of this abstract (but see: Dahlberg, 2011; Ferree et al., 2002), we will proceed straightforward by proposing an idea how online publics can be described.

According to Habermas (1974) the public sphere is a realm of social life where public opinion can be formed. This conception emphasizes the productive character of the public sphere which is not just a communicative space where different opinions are articulated (like in the liberal tradition), but rather mutually contested and discursively (trans)formed. At the end of this process something like public opinion may emerge, which ideally legitimates public policies (Habermas, 1996). This interpretation, however, puts a very strong focus on the generation of legitimacy that ultimately safeguards democratic policy making. Other authors have moved away from this intermediating understanding, stressing the social and cultural aspects of public spheres. This goes hand in hand with the general acknowledgment that there are rather multiple public sphere*s* than one singular public (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1990, Poor, 2006). In this interpretation, a public is a communicative entity: "A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself." (Warner, 2002, p. 413). Warner also stresses the constitutional role of the audience without which no public can exist. Together, communication and an audience that gathers around some topic or issue provide necessary conditions to form a public.

These patterns of publics seem easily adaptable for the online environment. An online public is constituted in the moment when an audience gathers, more or less publicly, in order to discuss a topic or issue considered to be relevant for the participants (Frieß, 2020). Such publics can emerge in online forums, on news websites, or in comment sections attached to news articles on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Previous research has analyzed such publics in many respects. Especially, the analysis of the textual quality of online publics has received much attention. Thus, several studies have analyzed whether or under which circumstances online publics live up to norms of deliberation such as civility, rationality, and reciprocity, which are believed to be good indicators for a *democratic* public discourse (e.g., Esau, Friess & Eilders, 2017; Rowe, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011). While deliberation is also possible to accrue online, recent research suggests that incivility is a very present phenomena in many online publics: controversial issues, such as migration, crime, or religion regularly attract high volumes of hateful and derogatory contributions and thus undermine democratic discourse (Coe, Kenski, Rains, 2014; Ziegele et al., 2018).

Reflecting the increasing dominance of such sort of discourse, Davis (2021, p. 143) has outlined the idea of *anti-public spheres*, which he defines as online spaces of "socio-political interaction where discourse routinely and radically flouts the ethical and rational norms of democratic discourse." According to him, such discourse is characterized by a lack of reasons, reflexivity, and rationality which makes it appealing for conspiracy theorists. It is further characterized by an antagonistic attitude as well as anti-elitist, anti-statist, and anti-cosmopolitan positions (Davis, 2021). It goes without saying that such anti-publics stand in stark contrast to deliberative ideals of the public sphere and the potential benefits associated with it.

3 Collective Civic Engagement and Civic Counter Publics

It is exactly this perceived dominance of anti-democratic online communication which has attracted scientific, political, and civil society's attention in recent years. The emergence of concepts such as *Online Civic Intervention* (OCI), *Collective Civic Engagement* (CCE), and *Civic Counter Publics* (CCP)is a direct reaction to the factual increase of what Davis (2021) has called anti-publics in which norms of deliberation are radically flouted. All concepts are closely related. However, a distinction across these concepts seems desirable.

According to Porten-Cheè et al. (2020, p. 515), *Online Civic Intervention* (OCI) is "a new form of user-based political participation in the digital sphere that aims to restore an accessible and reasoned public debate – a form of user participation that aims to restore deliberative debate." Individuals exercise OCI by reporting, flagging, or counterarguing toxic comments. Since they do so on an individual bases, we consider OCI to be a micro-level phenomenon.[1]

We have recently introduced the concept of C*ollective Civic Moderation* (Friess et al., 2020), which we slightly adjust for the purpose of this abstract when we talk about *Collective Civic Engagement* (CCE). We define CCE as the systematic and concerted interventions by groups pursuing the shared goal of facilitating democratic discourse online. CCE aligns with established concepts such as *collective action* because it pursues a collective purpose (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). It further relates to *corrective action* since CCE seeks to counteract the negative influences of certain online content that is perceived as harmful (Golan & Lim, 2016). Finally, it is a form of *civic engagement* because the group members engage as volunteers with a sense of common good orientation (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Since CCE is performed by organized groups, we consider it to be a meso-level phenomenon.

The concept of *Civic Counter Publics* (CCP) has not been introduced yet. We argue that CCE can contribute to CCP when it is able to set the tone back to civility. Nevertheless, proposing the idea of a civic counter public may seem counterintuitive since counter publics, by definition, need a hegemonic public to counter. Attaching the attribute 'civic' indicates that the dominant public is somehow 'uncivic'. However, we have already mentioned that research suggests that incivility is a very present phenomenon in many online publics (Coe, Kenski, Rains, 2014; Davis, 2021; Ziegele et al., 2018). Thus, uncivil discourse can be considered to be hegemonic in some online publics that emerge around controversial issues such as migration, crime, or religion which also may be characterized to be anti-publics (Davis, 2021). However, the theoretical idea of civic counter publics stands in contrast to previous thoughts on counter publics we briefly want to recapitulate.

The academic writing on counter publics took off with the already mentioned assessment that a singular public sphere, like envisioned in Habermas' (1989) early writings, is not suitable for plural societies (Fraser, 1990). Along these lines, Benhabib (1992) holds that "there may be as many publics as there are controversial debates about the validity of norms" (p. 105). This assumption, which also holds true for the internet, is no longer contested: "nearly all scholars of the public sphere agree that our social world is composed of multiple, overlapping, and unequal publics." (Breese, 2011, p. 132) In this realm, Asen (2000) states that the original conception of counter publics discloses unequal power relations in modern societies. In fact, early writings almost exclusively focused on historically disadvantaged groups such as women, feminists, homosexuals, or black people (Fraser, 1990; Gregory, 1995; Warner, 2002). Thus, the term counter publics has (always) been associated with social inequality and described the individual and collective efforts to create public spaces where both group related issues and identity can be freely discussed because there was no sufficient representation or space in the dominant 'mainstream' public (Breese, 2011; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). While early counter pubic research has mainly focused on certain groups and communities, more recent research has shifted the focus towards issues and topics (e.g. climate change; or EU policy) where counter publics want to establish certain narratives and reframe meanings or interpretations of the issue under discussion (e.g. Kaiser, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015).

[1] We limit the discussion of OCI in this abstract and refer to the original authors (Porten-Cheé et al., 2020).

With regard to CCP, these points of reference change. It is no longer race, sexual orientation, or gender, nor the specific issues or a policy field that integrates a counter public but rather the mutual commitment to certain discursive values such as rationality, respect, empathy, and civility. While the violation of those norms in fact seems often go hand in hand with intolerance, racism, and homophobia, it has to be very clear that CCP do not intend to discuss specific topics or issues but rather change the way *how* they are discussed. Thus, CCE engages on a macro-level by trying to influence the way how controversial issues are publicly discussed by setting the tone back to civility.

4 Critical Normative Reflections

Conclusively, we want to sketch some normative reflections on CCE which ultimately are able to constitute CCP. Firstly, we should ask whether such movements exercise discursive exclusion. This problem has formerly been articulated by feminist authors (Fraser, 1990; Sanders, 1998; Young, 2000) with regard to Habermas' bourgeois public sphere conception. Drawing on Bourdieu's idea of habitus, Fraser (1990) pointed out that certain groups in society who tend to speak in different manners, may not meet the standards of rational discourses envisioned by Habermas and others. In this context, the capacity of rational-critical debate can be seen as 'linguistic capital' which is distributed unequally among participants in public discourses. Those who do not possess those linguistic skills are consequently excluded or silenced. In this vein, Asen (2000) has stated that the counter in counter publics can have manifold meanings. However, they all feed in some sort of exclusion from the broader public in terms of persons and topics but also *speaking styles*. The latter is of main interest here. However, we deliberately do not want to accuse activists to practice discursive exclusion but rather point to the thin line between exclusion and the legitimate effort to maintain a democratic discussion climate.

Secondly, from a normative perspective, one may argue that while CCE aims to defend norms of deliberation, it may also violate some of them.[2] This is best illustrated by the strategic background of CCE where members gather in secret groups and closed networks to coordinate their actions. This strategic element stands in stark contrast to Habermas' (1984) ideal of communicative action. In addition to that, it goes without saying that a coordinated group exercises massive power in public online discussion, which again violates one of the core ideals of Habermas' ideal speech situation. Consequently, advocates of a free public sphere face the normative dilemma whether the ends justify the means: Is it normatively desirable to endorse a collective actor who engages in public discourse to foster deliberative norms? Or does this contradict the basic idea of deliberation where the only force in place should be the forceless force of the better argument?

Finally, a related issue concerns the question of whether the interventions of CCE groups are related to a specific political ideology. Research has mostly investigated this question in the context of far-right online activist groups which try to manipulate and bias public discourse by propagating their ideologies (Applebaum et al., 2017; Caiani & Wagemann, 2009). Much less is known about CCM groups. For example, it is unknown whether the engagement of groups such as #ichbinhier or Reconquista Internet only aim at promoting a specific form of expressing one's thoughts (i.e., in a respectful, rational, and constructive way), or if the groups also pursue own political agendas.

[2] This paragraph draws mainly on a discussion already published by Friess et al. (2020, p. 16).

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